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Chapter 5

Artefacts and Bodies among Kuna People from Panamá

Paolo Fortis

This chapter focuses on the interrelations between the making of objects and the making of bodies among Kuna people in contemporary Panama. In doing so it builds on current debates on Amerindian notions of materiality and on the growing field in anthropology that deals with the study of native ontologies through a focus on material culture (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). As noted by Hugh-Jones (2009), Amerindian anthropology has only recently begun to contribute to discussions on the status of objects and material culture, since previous studies conducted in this region gave greater emphasis to the role of animals and plants in native ontologies. Recent works have nonetheless shown the richness of Amerindian thinking about artefacts, the place of objects in indigenous socio-cosmologies and their role in processes of creating human persons (Lagrou 2007, Barcelos Neto 2008, Santos-Granero 2009). In this chapter I analyze the making of particular objects among Kuna people and argue that this activity is best understood analogically as a process of making and growing human bodies. As the ethnographic and comparative material presented below shows, some Amerindian peoples do not distinguish between organisms and artefacts when they talk about bodies and material objects. What they instead emphasize are the capacities entailed in the making of artefacts and babies, the fertility that enables men and women to make both, and the qualities that the objects made transmit to human beings.

Alfred Gell's seminal work (1998) has stimulated anthropological analysis of artworks, their production and perception, and their place within peoples' worldviews. By considering objects *as* persons we de-objectify them, and by de-objectifying objects we gain better insights into their makers' ontology. For instance, in recent years scholars of Melanesia have explored the relations between persons and objects, highlighting native ideas of personhood by looking at the making, exchange and ritual use of specific objects (Battaglia 1983, Munn 1986). The main point that these scholars make is that objects are the analogical counterparts of persons. In this sense objects embody and propagate specific aspects of persons and, by the same token, enhance personhood and extend relations. Melanesian objects, therefore, comprise various elements, each refracting a specific relation, or an 'image of personhood – corporate or individual' (Battaglia 1983: 301). For instance, the external form of Gawan canoes (see Munn 1986: 138–47), produced by men, evokes the facial appearance of children, given by their fathers, in

1 contrast to their bodily substance, given by their mothers. Men in Gawa acquire 1
 2 the capacity to give form from women, who provide them with the raw material to 2
 3 shape: blood in the case of foetuses, and red wood in the case of the hull of canoes 3
 4 (ibid.: 138). Form in this case is dependent on gendered substances. 4

5 Strathern explores ideas of personhood in relation to objects through her 5
 6 cross-cultural discussion of Melanesian ethnography (2004 [1991]: 63–76). 6
 7 Objects, she argues, are not just ‘extensions integral to the relationships a 7
 8 person makes, and “instruments” in that sense’. Rather, ‘the physical body is 8
 9 apprehended as composed of those instruments as it is composed of relationships’ 9
 10 (ibid.: 76). Her argument provides an interesting counterpoint for my analysis 10
 11 here. While Strathern shows that some Melanesians consider the role of bodily 11
 12 *substances* to be crucial for body formation and making artefacts such as canoes 12
 13 (see Munn 1986: 138–47), Kuna people seem to concern themselves principally 13
 14 with *form* when thinking of bodies and artefacts. The difference of emphasis 14
 15 respectively on *substance* and *form* appears to be the main distinction between 15
 16 the ways in which the formation of bodies and persons and, by extension, the 16
 17 making and conceptualization of artefacts, are understood in these two regions 17
 18 of the world. For the Kuna, where both men and women are able to give form 18
 19 respectively to foetuses and to artefacts, what is at stake is the acquisition and 19
 20 mastering of plastic skill by Kuna men and of the capacity to create designs by 20
 21 Kuna women. 21

22 Santos-Granero argues that ‘in Amerindian ontologies, it is craftsmanship 22
 23 rather than childbearing that provides the model for all creative acts’ (2009: 8). 23
 24 However, Kuna ethnography shows that both childbearing and craftsmanship are 24
 25 processes that entail the manipulation of form. In this chapter I shall demonstrate 25
 26 that it is rather the making and growing of bodies that provides a model for 26
 27 material activities of giving form to objects. Kuna people use an idiom of birth 27
 28 to describe artefactual activities. In this sense, giving form is no more a way of 28
 29 *making* than a way of *growing*. Giving form is a process that entails the fertile 29
 30 capacities of persons. Fertility, for Kuna people, is a social praxis acquired by 30
 31 human beings through the mastering of non-human qualities, such as the predatory 31
 32 skills of particular animals and the blood strengthening property of some plant 32
 33 medicines (Fortis 2010). These qualities need to be channelled through shamanic 33
 34 practices in order to become productive for human sociality. Thus, giving form 34
 35 is to be understood as a social praxis emerging from the transformation of men’s 35
 36 and women’s bodily capacities. This transformation is itself the outcome of the 36
 37 interaction between different persons and between persons and the environing 37
 38 world. Moreover, far from being conceived only as the product of the creative 38
 39 human mind, form is better apprehended as a state of being within a network of 39
 40 relationships, including human beings, objects, animals and trees. 40

41 Ingold (2000) points out that the modern western distinction between *making* 41
 42 and *growing*, which rests on human transcendence and objectification of nature, 42
 43 carries the implication that the human capacity to make extends to the relations 43
 44 between people and living things. This allows human actions such as cultivation 44

1 and animal breeding to be considered as forms of making, thereby extending the
 2 idea of making from inanimate to animate beings. Ingold further suggests that
 3 we can conversely extend the idea of growing from animate beings to artefacts,
 4 since people and materials are mutually involved in the growing of forms within a
 5 specific environment (2000: 347). Kuna people and other Amerindians understand
 6 human reproductive capacities as a form of *growing* that is akin to *making*
 7 (Viveiros de Castro 1979, Vilaça 2002); Cashinahua people say that bodies are
 8 ‘made to grow’ (Mc Callum 1996: 348). In what follows I argue, therefore, that
 9 artefacts, as bodies, are *grown* in this context as much as, or perhaps even more
 10 than, they are *made*.

13 Amerindian Theories of Materiality

15 As described in myths currently told by different peoples across the Lowlands
 16 of Central and South America, objects used in everyday life were people in
 17 ancient times (Lévi-Strauss 1969, Viveiros de Castro 1977, Barcelos Neto 2008).
 18 These objects, along with animal and plant species, underwent processes of
 19 transformation and separation, thereby losing their appearance as persons. Thus
 20 it is not surprising that when nowadays indigenous people talk about the making
 21 of specific objects in their daily life they use idioms of birth and growth, and
 22 emphasize the human fertile capacities entailed in their production (Overing 1989,
 23 Fortis 2012a, 2012b).

24 People and objects are involved in constant flows of exchange whereby each
 25 party transmits qualities to the other. Some objects acquire their own independent
 26 subjectivity in relation to human beings and are imbued with human qualities,
 27 while human beings are strengthened, healed and made to grow by way of specific
 28 objects and bodily decorations, as in the carved wooden stools and body paintings
 29 used among the Cashinahua (Lagrou 2007). The ultimate goal of making objects
 30 seems always to be that of contributing to the creation and maintenance of healthy
 31 human bodies.

32 Taylor and Viveiros de Castro (2006) insightfully argue that Amazonian
 33 peoples, instead of creating what in the West is defined as ‘figurative art’, dedicate
 34 all their creative energies to the creation of human bodies. The real ‘work of art’ for
 35 Amazonians, they say, is the human body. The creation of bodies is indeed a long-
 36 standing topic in Amerindian ethnography. Many studies have focused on bodily
 37 decorations and the ways in which bodies are socialized and humanized through the
 38 use of decorations, painting and body marks (Seeger 1975, Turner 1995, Gow 1999,
 39 Lagrou 2007). More recently Ewart and O’Hanlon (2007) have brought the topic
 40 of body art into dialogue with notions of Amerindian perspectivism. These authors
 41 show how body decorations and clothing allow for specific bodily capacities to
 42 be activated and enable people to move within different social contexts. Santos-
 43 Granero, who addresses the interface between Amazonian notions of personhood
 44 and materiality, proposes the notion of ‘constructional ontologies’, arguing that

1 many Amazonians conceive 'all living beings as composite entities, made up of 1
2 the bodies and parts of bodies of a diversity of life forms, among which artefacts 2
3 occupy a prominent place' (2009: 21). 3

4 Despite the analysis of notions of materiality among Amerindians 4
5 the question of what counts as an object in native ontologies needs further 5
6 ethnographic and comparative study. Here I draw on Taylor and Viveiros de 6
7 Castro's point that the body is the real 'work of art' for Amerindians, to argue 7
8 that for Kuna people making bodies is the prototype of making more generally. 8
9 Next I consider a specific instance of Kuna woodcarving and its relation to 9
10 the creation of bodies, which was made explicit to me by my Kuna informants 10
11 in 2004. By focusing on this example as an instance of a more general model of 11
12 making artefacts, I suggest a path for interpreting the analogy between making 12
13 artefacts and making bodies in other Amerindian societies. I then compare 13
14 Kuna ethnography with that of the Cashinahua living in the Acre state (Brazil) 14
15 on the relation between making bodies and making artefacts, focusing on some 15
16 key categories of Kuna aesthetic epistemology, namely, 'images', 'designs' and 16
17 'bodies' (Fortis 2012a). 17

18

19

20 **Kuna Woodcarving** 20

21

22 Kuna people use the verb *sopet* to indicate activities involving carving wooden 22
23 objects such as dug-out canoes, building houses, weaving baskets, moulding 23
24 clay and fermenting maize and sugar cane drink. The same verb is also used with 24
25 reference to gestation, indicating the moulding of the foetus's body in the mother's 25
26 womb. This last process is termed *koe sopet*, 'forming the baby'. Making objects 26
27 and making bodies are thus thought of as similar processes by Kuna people. 27
28 To better appreciate their understandings of such activities as carving a canoe, 28
29 weaving a basket or carving wooden ritual figures, it is necessary to consider what 29
30 Kuna people conceive of as 'form' (*sopalet*), and how forms are thought to be 30
31 brought into being through different but interconnected processes that involve the 31
32 complementary and coordinated actions of women and men. 32

33 Carved wooden figures, called *nuchukana* in Kuna language (singular *nuchu*), 33
34 are small anthropomorphic figures between 20 and 30 cm tall, representing male 34
35 and female persons. Sometimes these figures are carved to look like missionaries 35
36 or soldiers, although mostly they appear as rough, generic figures of persons in an 36
37 upright position. They all tend to have long, thin and prominent noses, and either 37
38 a hat for male figures, or a headscarf for female figures. *Nuchukana* are kept in 38
39 varying numbers in every Kuna household, and are assigned the role of protecting 39
40 family members against illness and misfortune. Kuna people consider carving 40
41 *nuchukana* the highest form of woodcarving, more difficult than carving a dug-out 41
42 canoe, because it entails the creation of a new person that will be incorporated at 42
43 home as a co-resident (Figure 5.1). 43

44



Figure 5.1 Leopoldo Smith carving a female *nuchu*, 2004. Still from a video by Paolo Fortis

When an elder man goes to the mainland forest with the intention of making a *nuchu* he first finds an appropriate tree. Imposing emergent trees are mostly found deep inland, far from the coast, and reaching them requires a long walk in the forest. Once the appropriate type of tree, chosen from a restricted number of species used in woodcarving, has been found, the man sings a brief formula aimed at advising it that he is about to cut a part of its body. Normally the man would cut a small portion of a root and immediately make a small mark on one of its extremities with his machete. As Garibaldo del Vasto, a Kuna medicine man in his 60s, once explained to me while cutting part of a root of an incredibly tall and stout almendro (*Dipteryx panamensis*), the little incision is a reminder for later when, at home, he will start carving a stick from the portion of root. The mark will remind him where to carve the nose of the *nuchu*, starting from which he will then proceed to carve the rest of the figure. The nose is carved in the lower part of the stick, which was closer to the earth and facing eastward when still attached to the tree, that is, in the direction of the rising sun and where the souls of the dead reside (see Fortis 2012b). The position of the nose has to be remembered because, as Garibaldo and other Kuna men explained to me, *nuchukana* are born in the same way as human babies are, with the head positioned downwards.

1 The process of carving is normally completed without ceremony during spare 1
 2 time spent on the house patio where everyday activities are carried out by other 2
 3 members of the household. The last touches include inserting glass beads into 3
 4 small holes, for eyes, and painting the cheeks with red annatto (derived from the 4
 5 fruit of the achiote tree, *Bixa orellana*). Once the *nuchu* is carved it is the task 5
 6 of a ritual chanter, usually a different person from the carver, to sing it to life. 6
 7 The *nuchu* will then be given to the persons who requested the carver for it and 7
 8 incorporated into their household along with other pre-existing *nuchukana*. From 8
 9 that moment onwards it will start its life as a particular type of co-resident along 9
 10 with human beings. 10

11 12 13 **Co-residents** 13 14 14

15 Almost every Kuna household keeps a box with several *nuchukana* in it. I have 15
 16 rarely seen boxes containing less than five or six figures, the usual number being 16
 17 between 10 and 20. These boxes are kept at the foot of one of the two wooden 17
 18 poles that support houses. It was my curiosity and insistence that brought Kuna 18
 19 men and women to pick up one particular *nuchu* to show it to me or to move the 19
 20 entire box outside the house so that I could better see the figures in it. Although 20
 21 people did not usually talk about *nuchukana*, when I asked about them they were 21
 22 adamant about one thing: *nuchukana* are ‘persons’ (*tulekana*) and need to be treated 22
 23 with respect, to be remembered. Kuna people explained to me that these figures 23
 24 are powerful ‘seers’ (*nelekana*), who can see and travel in the different layers of 24
 25 the cosmos, interact with different kinds of human and non-human beings and 25
 26 harm those who treat them badly. I also noticed that children never played with 26
 27 them or, indeed, dared to touch them. However some children were given, by 27
 28 their grandfather, wooden dolls to play with, which to my eyes closely resembled 28
 29 *nuchukana* (Figure 5.2). 29

30 Kuna people remember their wooden protector friends during daily life. To 30
 31 ‘remember’ (*epinsaet*) someone is an expression of love for one’s kinspeople or 31
 32 of close amity towards one’s friends. Kuna people remember their kin who live in 32
 33 other households by regularly sending them food. They remember the kin who have 33
 34 moved to Panama City or other destinations, and whom they have not seen for a 34
 35 long time, referring to them by name during daily activities. Acts of remembering 35
 36 are key to the everyday maintenance of kinship in the Kuna lived world, and 36
 37 food exchange is the main vehicle for creating and maintaining kinship relations 37
 38 (Margiotti 2010). Similarly, household members nurture their *nuchukana*. Adult 38
 39 men call them when they eat their daily meal, so that they can satisfy their hunger 39
 40 through the smell of food. Elder women, who enjoy smoking pipes or cigarettes 40
 41 at night-time, often puff tobacco smoke over the wooden figures, which provides 41
 42 them with refreshing unfermented ‘maize drink’ (*inna*). Young and pre-pubescent 42
 43 girls wash *nuchukana* every once in a while, bathing them in water perfumed with 43
 44 sweet basil leaves, the same bathing practice used by medicine men before going 44



Figure 5.2 *Nuchukana*, 2004. Photograph by Paolo Fortis

to the forest to gather plant medicines. These are the ways in which Kuna people remember their powerful wooden friends and make sure that the latter remember them when illness and misfortune afflict a member of the household.

Body and Form

The creation of new human bodies is paramount for most Amerindians and takes up much, if not most, individual and collective energies. Before further exploring Kuna ideas of 'form' or 'figure' (*sopalet*) in relation to the creation of bodies, I want to consider the connections between artefactual activities and bodily processes by presenting data from the ethnography of Cashinahua people, which points to similar analogies between making artefacts and making persons. In particular, I am interested in the relation between designs, images and the creation of bodies, which is key to Cashinahua ontology, as Els Lagrou suggests (2007: 108–37). This relationship is highly significant in Amerindian material and visual worlds, as becomes apparent with the comparative examination of specific features of Amerindian aesthetics.

Cecilia McCallum has argued that for the Cashinahua, 'making artefacts' and 'making babies' are similar activities. The verb, *dami va-*, meaning 'to transform',

1 'to make an image', is used to indicate the process of forming a foetus in the 1
 2 mother's womb through sexual intercourse; the noun *dami* denotes a 'drawing' 2
 3 or a 'doll' (McCallum 2001: 17). This has two main implications. The first is that 3
 4 the creation of human bodies is conceived as an active process of fabrication. 4
 5 The second relates to the status of artefacts as persons, endowed with agency 5
 6 and key in mediating relationships between human beings, animals and spirits 6
 7 (see Lagrou 1998). The creation of artefacts such as stools, woven hammocks 7
 8 and designs, either painted on bodies or woven, entails the skill and embodied 8
 9 knowledge of women and men. In particular, women master the creation of 9
 10 'designs' (*kene*), while men learn to control hallucinogenic 'images' (*dami*). 10

11 As Cashinahua current myths explain, human beings learned to make designs 11
 12 in ancient time thanks to the encounter between a young woman and, depending 12
 13 on the version of the myth, either an old lady, or a young lover. Both the old 13
 14 lady and the young boy are incarnations of Boa, the mythical being and owner 14
 15 of all designs, which are visible on its skin. Designs on the boa's skin are in 15
 16 turn the origin of any kind of form, since the spots on the snake's skin, in the 16
 17 words of a Cashinahua man, 'open themselves and show a door to enter into new 17
 18 forms' (Lagrou 2009: 205). Designs, in Cashinahua exegesis, have therefore prior 18
 19 existence to images and forms. Designs originate forms. This is an important point 19
 20 to which I return below. 20

21 Another instance of this way of thinking, which sees designs as the precondition 21
 22 of form, is the link between the skin of the anaconda and women's menstruation. 22
 23 *Yube*, the mythological anaconda – which has all kinds of designs on its skin – 23
 24 is considered immortal because it sheds its skin. Women, Cashinahua people say, 24
 25 shed their internal skin during menstruation. Furthermore, the uterus is called 25
 26 *xankin*, which, as Lagrou notes, provides the root for the verb *xankeikiki*, meaning 26
 27 'to weave designs' (2007: 113). Further, the uterus is thought of, by the Cashinahua, 27
 28 as a designed skin that filters communication between its inside, where the body of 28
 29 the foetus is being shaped, and the outside world beyond the mother's body. 29

30 The association between the skin of the anaconda and the 'internal skin' 30
 31 of women can be taken a step further. The designs on the skin of the mythical 31
 32 serpent open up, giving access to new forms (Lagrou 2009). Designs thus generate 32
 33 forms. When men and women look at the spots on the boa's skin in visions 33
 34 experienced during the ceremonial killing of this animal, they can enter into 34
 35 another world populated by images of persons, called *dami* (meaning 'images' 35
 36 or 'transformations'). This is also reminiscent of Peter Gow's description of Piro 36
 37 people's *ayahuasca* visions (1989). When people ingest *ayahuasca*, a vine, their 37
 38 hallucinations begin with geometric patterns covering their visual field. Once they 38
 39 overcome this first stage, if they are able to cope with the intense fear caused 39
 40 by the visions, they will encounter the mother of *ayahuasca* in the appearance 40
 41 of a beautiful woman. But what the skin of the anaconda is also about for the 41
 42 Cashinahua is its shedding, a capacity that makes the snake immortal. The 42
 43 immortality of the mythical anaconda is connected with the infinite proliferation 43
 44 of forms that emerge from the designs on its skin. 44

1 With regard to the association between snake's skin and the uterus, for 1
 2 Cashinahua, it must be noted that the latter is seen as the container wherein new 2
 3 human forms are shaped. The womb epitomizes women's capacity to create 3
 4 new forms. Like the skin of the anaconda, women's internal skin can be shed, 4
 5 thus maintaining its powerful generative capacity. If shedding the skin gives the 5
 6 anaconda immortality, shedding the internal skin gives women the capacity to 6
 7 perpetuate human life, which is another form of immortality. Yet for Cashinahua 7
 8 there is an important difference between the creation of forms emerging from 8
 9 the designs on the snake's skin and the creation of bodies in women's wombs. 9
 10 As McCallum (2001: 52) notes, there is an association between procreating and 10
 11 cooking. Hence pots are analogous to wombs. Human bodies are made through 11
 12 a process similar to cooking food, *bava-* in Cashinahua, whereby female blood 12
 13 and male semen are mixed together to form the substance of a new body, which 13
 14 is cooked in the mother's womb. In addition to the process of 'cooking', bodies 14
 15 have to be made heavy in order to be made to grow and be healthy. This is 15
 16 achieved through naming, the feeding of proper food and other ritual actions 16
 17 (Lagrou 2007: 413–530). 17

18

19

20 **Body and Design**

21

22 Thus we can observe a series of connections between designs, skin (internal 22
 23 or external) and the creation of new forms and bodies. The idea that designs 23
 24 participate in the generation of forms and bodies is reinforced by a common feature 24
 25 of Cashinahua and Kuna ontologies, namely, that human bodies come to acquire 25
 26 their shape within a container covered in designs: the uterus. Kuna people describe 26
 27 the 'amniotic sac' (*kurkin*, which also means 'hat', 'brain' and 'intelligence') as 27
 28 constituted by several layers of tissue covered with geometric designs, which are 28
 29 drawn by non-human celestial entities referred to as 'grandmothers' (*muukana*). 29
 30 These designs are sometimes visible after birth on the remains of the amniotic 30
 31 sac covering the head of some newborns and are attentively scrutinized by Kuna 31
 32 midwives, the main interpreters of amniotic designs. Those babies who are born 32
 33 showing amniotic designs are considered destined to be particularly intelligent 33
 34 and skilled in socially valued activities, such as making clothes, carving canoes, 34
 35 and learning healing chants, botanic medicine and foreign languages. 35

36 The presence of designs at birth provides a powerful means to enhance the 36
 37 future capacities of the person-to-be. Amniotic designs are the visible sign of the 37
 38 animal side of newborns, and indeed of the common humanity of animals and 38
 39 humans. By showing the link with a particular predatory species, each amniotic 39
 40 design represents both a danger and a gift. In its initial state the design is the 40
 41 visible manifestation of an illness caused by the animal. However, if properly 41
 42 treated with plant medicines, for newborns with amniotic designs the dangerous 42
 43 consubstantiality with animals can be turned into much prized human praxes when 43
 44 they grow into adult persons (Fortis 2010: 488–9). Thus animals for Kuna people 44

1 are both a cause of illness and death, and the source of knowledge. However, cutting 1
 2 this initial link to animals, manifested in amniotic designs, is a precondition for the 2
 3 fabrication of human bodies. Amniotic designs are a means to form human bodies, 3
 4 insofar as they provide a guide for adult people to choose the best medicine to 4
 5 ensure that their young kin lose those animal habits that they might have acquired 5
 6 in their pre-natal life, and to strengthen the bodies of those kin. 6

7

8

9 **From Body to Artefacts**

10

11 Amniotic designs signal a further overlap between the creation of bodies and that 11
 12 of artefacts. Kuna people regard the amniotic sac (*kurkin*) as the first clothing of 12
 13 babies (see Gow 1999: 236), and described it to me as several layers of tissue 13
 14 that contain the foetus in the mother's womb. *Kurkin*, as noted above, also means 14
 15 'hat', and this refers to both the hat that men wear in everyday life and that which 15
 16 some babies are born with, in the form of layers of amniotic membrane. After 16
 17 birth, amniotic designs turn into bodily capacities that, if properly mastered and 17
 18 channelled, when adult people teach their young kin, will help develop social 18
 19 praxis. Each person develops the gendered skills that make him or her into an 19
 20 adult person in the eyes of the other adults. Men learn to garden, fish and hunt, and 20
 21 some specialize in ritual knowledge. Women learn to cook food, make maize drink 21
 22 and sing lullabies, and some specialize in birth medicine. In this context, young 22
 23 children's amniotic designs guide adult people in making the bodies of their young 23
 24 kin grow to become healthy and skilled. 24

25 Among the gendered social praxes that men and women acquire throughout 25
 26 their lives are the skills involved in making artefacts. The development of such 26
 27 skills depends on personal inclinations, which, as Kuna people explained to 27
 28 me, are in some cases a 'gift' that a person receives from birth. This gift takes 28
 29 the form of the aforementioned amniotic designs which signal the newborn's 29
 30 attachment to a particular animal species, and thus make visible the predisposition 30
 31 of some children to become skilled persons. Indeed, those born showing their 31
 32 amniotic designs have the advantage of receiving further medicinal treatment that 32
 33 will increase their capacity to learn specialist skills. Men can learn to carve canoes, 33
 34 stools and other objects, to build houses, and to weave baskets. Women learn to 34
 35 design and sew their colourful blouses, make beadworks and mould clay braziers. 35

36 Design *is* praxis for Kuna people, insofar as it is a constitutive part of the person 36
 37 (i.e. *kurkin*) and it makes visible a person's capacity to learn socially recognized 37
 38 knowledge (Fortis 2010: 491). The capacity that Kuna people have to carry out 38
 39 particular activities in their daily life, or indeed their individual skill in creating 39
 40 what are regarded as beautiful artefacts, derives from the transformation that each 40
 41 person's amniotic designs undergoes during his or her life. Furthermore, amniotic 41
 42 designs are both bodily features and artefacts. They are drawn by the celestial 42
 43 grandmothers and consequently undergo manipulation through the healing 43
 44 practices of Kuna specialists. They are thus fabricated and transformed by both 44

1 human and non-human agencies. As such, they blur the western distinction between
2 organisms and artefacts. Amniotic designs, therefore, force anthropologists to
3 rethink what they have so far assumed an object to be for Amerindians.

6 Layering and Immortality

8 Besides covering the amniotic sac, designs assume other forms in the Kuna lived
9 world. As with the Cashinahua and most Amerindians, it is Kuna women who make
10 designs. They spend most of their spare time in sewing their elaborate blouses,
11 called *molakana* (singular *mola*). The technique that they employ involves the
12 use of two or more layers of poplin fabric in different colours. They draw designs
13 with a pencil on one layer of fabric, then cut along the drawn lines and stitch
14 each layer onto the one below. Adding more layers on top of each other, they
15 increase the complexity of designs and the number of colours, thereby creating
16 beautiful patterns that are subsequently sewn together with yoke and sleeves
17 to form the blouse. Each seamstress then typically wears her own blouse (see
18 Salvador 1978, 1997).

19 *Mola* and *kurkin*, blouse and amniotic sac, have two features in common: they
20 are both constituted by several layers of either fabric or amniotic tissue and they
21 are covered with designs. The layering of *mola* and *kurkin* is reminiscent of the
22 shedding of snakes' skin. As noted earlier, for Kuna people, snakes are immortal
23 thanks to the shedding of their skin, as for the Cashinahua who, in addition,
24 suggest a similarity between women's menstruation and the shedding of snakes'
25 skin. Moreover, for them, women are fertile because they shed their internal skin
26 (Lagrou 2007: 113). Immortality and fertility are therefore linked. Furthermore,
27 Kuna people's description of the amniotic sac is not entirely dissimilar to the
28 Cashinahua description of the shedding of women's internal skin. Although my
29 Kuna informants never stated this explicitly to me, I suggest that there might be a
30 connection between the amniotic sac and the skin of snakes (Figure 5.3).

31 Constituted by several layers of tissue that come off one after the other, the
32 amniotic sac is like the petals of a flower, as a Kuna woman told me. This layering
33 also provides the amniotic sac with characteristics similar to the skin of snakes.
34 This connection between amniotic sac and snake is perhaps the reason why, as
35 Kuna people explained to me, persons who have been bitten by a snake are cured
36 in seclusion, taking particular care not to get close to pregnant women. Even
37 brief physical proximity to an expectant mother could aggravate the condition
38 of the person bitten by a snake and even cause their death. The illness caused by
39 a snake bite is said to be particularly difficult to cure since it keeps changing its
40 form inside the victim's body. For this reason, at the time of my fieldwork few
41 healers could master the song to cure snake bites. This song is said to be one of
42 the most lengthy and difficult to learn, and the images it evokes are particularly
43 complex since their purpose is to counteract the constantly changing forms that
44 the snake's soul, which causes the illness, assumes once inside the victim's body.



Figure 5.3 Nixia Pérez sewing a *mola*, 2003. Photograph by Margherita Margiotti

The task of the healer is to stop these transformations and pin the snake's soul down to then expel it from the sick body (see Chapin 1983: 112, 284–96). It therefore makes sense that the creative power of a pregnant woman, who is in the process of producing a new human form, poses a threat to the healing of snake bites, which aims at stopping the transformations of the snake's soul.

If layering stands for shedding skin, then what is the link between layering, shedding skin and immortality? I suggest the link is the production of new forms. In the case of the Cashinahua mythical anaconda the new forms are immaterial images that populate the cosmos. In the case of the shedding of the internal skin, and indeed of the layered *kurkin*, the production of new forms amounts to the creation of new bodies. And women's fertility, the capacity to produce new human bodies, is connected with their bodily capacity to create designs.

Kuna people explain that within the womb, male and female sexual fluids are moulded like an alloy in a cast that gives it a human shape. To ensure the safe creation of their child's human body both parents have to follow several dietary and behavioural restrictions, including the avoidance of eating, or even physical or visual proximity to, a number of animal species considered dangerous due to their predatory attitude (Margiotti 2010). During pregnancy, and for a few days just

1 after birth, taboos are at their strictest as these are considered the most dangerous 1
 2 periods. There is usually close scrutiny of the neonate's body, as form and visual 2
 3 appearance are the first signs of humanity and of the successful work of both 3
 4 parents. Thus *kurkin*, and its outward analogue, *mola*, stand in comparison with 4
 5 the Cashinahua uterus and with the skin of the mythical snake. For the snake's 5
 6 skin, layering and designs are connected to immortality. For *kurkin*, layering and 6
 7 designs are connected to the reproduction of human life – perhaps, then, another 7
 8 form of immortality. 8

9

10

11 **Origin of Designs and Forms** 11

12

13 According to the Kuna myth of origin of designs, in the ancient time a woman 13
 14 called Nakekiryai – in some versions the sister of a powerful shaman, in others 14
 15 a powerful shaman herself – travelled to the underworld village of Kalu Tukpis, 15
 16 where she observed all types of designs covering tree trunks and leaves. When 16
 17 she returned to her village she taught other women how to make such designs. In 17
 18 this way Kuna women learned to decorate their clothing and to make beadworks 18
 19 (see Méndez in Wakua, Green and Peláez 1996: 39–43, Perrin 1998: 19). In the 19
 20 village of Ustupu I asked the man who told me this myth what Kuna women wore 20
 21 before they had access to western goods. I also asked whether the layered reverse- 21
 22 appliqué technique currently used for *molakana* is a recent invention, given that 22
 23 women's attire since the end of the nineteenth century has been entirely made out 23
 24 of material obtained from non-Kuna people in Panama and Colón. He answered 24
 25 that *molakana* were made long before the arrival of Europeans. Ancient Kuna 25
 26 people, he said, made *molakana* using tree bark. 26

27 Tree bark is *ukka* in Kuna language, which means 'skin', and Kuna people 27
 28 say that trees are immortal because they shed their skin, like snakes (see 28
 29 Rivière 1994: 260). That Nakekiryai saw the first designs on the bark of trees, in 29
 30 Kuna myth, is therefore particularly telling, since this would close the circle of 30
 31 associations between snake skin, amniotic sac and *molakana* via tree bark. Thus 31
 32 tree bark can be seen as another type of skin that is shed and which, like the skin 32
 33 of snakes and the uterus, generates new forms. But how is this so? 33

34 Returning to Cashinahua ethnography, the connection between tree and uterus 34
 35 stands out clearly. In one myth about the origin of humanity it is narrated that the 35
 36 'first people were created in a hole in a tree; and in the transcription the term used for 36
 37 this hole (*xankin*) is that normally used to refer to a womb' (McCallum 2001: 52). 37
 38 This provides interesting cross-cultural support for my argument, which could be 38
 39 extended to other Amerindian societies. Trees are often seen as containers either for 39
 40 primordial spirits, as in the case of the Kuna, the Emberá (Vasco 1985: 38) and the 40
 41 Wauja (Barcelos Neto 2002: 115), or for the souls of the dead, as in the case of the 41
 42 Cashinahua (Lagrou 2007: 348–9), or for the souls of sick persons, as for the Emberá 42
 43 (Vasco 1985: 80). Furthermore, in Kalapalo and Yanomami mythology the first human 43
 44 beings were carved out of the wood of specific trees (Basso 1987, Rivière 1994). 44

1 The interior of a tree, its hardest part, its core, is called *kwa* in Kuna language. 1
 2 To my knowledge there are only two ways in which the *kwa* of trees is used by 2
 3 Kuna people. One is to make house posts, in which case the core of the trunk is 3
 4 stripped of the softer external parts. Another is to carve *nuchukana*. *Nuchukana* 4
 5 are best understood as ‘figures of interiority’, which stand in a metonymic relation 5
 6 with the invisible and immortal component of persons, *purpa*, or ‘soul’, or 6
 7 ‘image’ (Fortis 2012b). As noted by Rivière (1994) for the Trio, by Lagrou for 7
 8 the Cashinahua (1998) and more recently by Miller for the Mamaindê (2009), 8
 9 Amerindians associate hardness, instantiated by hard wood, rocks, or glass beads, 9
 10 with permanence, immortality, souls and the spirit world. Since many Amerindians 10
 11 regard trees as containers of ‘soul images’, the association between hollow tree 11
 12 and uterus assumes new connotations. The process of ‘forming the baby’ in the 12
 13 mother’s uterus for the Kuna is akin to the proliferation of soul images inside trees. 13
 14 As trees for Kuna people host infinite primordial souls, when an elder man carves 14
 15 a *nuchu* he facilitates, as it were, the birth of a new subjectivity. As the Kuna myth 15
 16 of the origin of designs suggests, in accordance with Cashinahua exegesis, trees 16
 17 are therefore analogous to design-covered uteruses. 17

18 The ethnography analyzed in this chapter shows that trees and wombs share 18
 19 the capacity to create forms. Furthermore, as shown above, designs are associated 19
 20 with the generative capacities of the maternal womb, snake skin and trees. Since 20
 21 design for Kuna people instantiates the capacity to act skilfully in their lived world 21
 22 and facilitates the growth of healthy and intelligent persons, it is not surprising 22
 23 that it is primarily associated with the creation of bodies, and of forms such as 23
 24 *nuchukana* and *molakana*. 24

25 25
 26 26

27 **Conclusions** 27

28 28

29 When a Kuna man carves a *nuchu* his activity is similar to that undertaken when 29
 30 a woman gestates a child. He carves a wooden form to host the invisible soul of 30
 31 primordial beings. By doing so he effectively creates a new subjectivity out of the 31
 32 multiplicity of primordial souls, thus creating the conditions for their interactions 32
 33 with human beings. But whereas human beings acquire the capacity to reproduce 33
 34 themselves, *nuchukana* lack that capacity. They lack the generative capacity that 34
 35 human beings acquire through their design-covered *kurkin*. Lacking designs, 35
 36 *nuchukana* are sterile beings, incapable of generating new forms and so, in this 36
 37 respect, they are incapable of growing. By contrast, human beings develop the 37
 38 praxis to grow and reproduce themselves, and to create beautiful and powerful 38
 39 objects. Learning to sew *molakana* and wearing them in everyday life, Kuna 39
 40 women effectively make their fertile capacities visible to other people. Women 40
 41 make *molakana* in adulthood and when they have children. During pregnancy a 41
 42 woman dedicates the time freed from heavier domestic chores to sewing *molakana* 42
 43 (Margiotti 2010). *Molakana* are conceived, then, as manifestations of both the 43
 44 preconditions and the fulfilment of women’s capacities to make babies (Figure 5.4). 44



Figure 5.4 Mikita Smith posing with her *nuchukana* and one of her nephews, 2004. Photograph by Paolo Fortis

1 The material activities described by Kuna people as ‘giving form’ (*sopet*) 1
 2 should be understood as transformations of processes of making bodies. The basic 2
 3 element in this process, form, is what matters when new babies and objects are 3
 4 created. It is through the human praxis of giving form that Kuna women and men 4
 5 create bodies and artefacts. For Kuna people there is no opposition between making 5
 6 and growing; bodies and objects are equally the outcome of processes of making 6
 7 and growing. Most importantly, the human capacity to make is understood as an 7
 8 ongoing transformation of fertility emerging and developing during a person’s life 8
 9 cycle, from birth to death. Being able to create human bodies epitomizes artefactual 9
 10 processes in general. What is at stake is clearly not a distinction between organisms 10
 11 and artefacts, but the capacity to generate forms as the precondition of existence in 11
 12 a human lived world. 12

13 Human beings possess *purpa*, or soul, which renders them alive. They receive 13
 14 the *purpa* when the body first forms. Similarly, giving form to particular objects 14
 15 makes them alive, it endows them with *purpa*. Carving *nuchukana* is a case in 15
 16 point, where their aliveness is conveyed by their visual resemblance to human 16
 17 persons. These Kuna wooden figures are just one instantiation of a more general 17
 18 principle, according to which artful activities are understood in relation to 18
 19 processes of procreation, and procreation is understood as an artful process. 19
 20 20
 21 21

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 33 33
 34 34

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